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SUBJECT: 'UMUCO' EDITOR BONAVENTURE BIZUMUREMYI REFUSES SUMMONS FOR QUESTIONING BY JUDICIAL POLICE

¶11. (U) SUMMARY. More than one week after being served with a summons to be questioned by the criminal investigation division of the Rwandan National Police, Bonaventure Bizumuremyi, editor of the Kinyarwanda language fortnightly 'Umuco,' remains unwilling to appear for questioning and is on the run from authorities. The summons for questioning does not imply it would lead to arrest or the filing of charges. The summons likely relates to articles published in the last three issues of Umuco, which included inflammatory (and potentially libelous) statements about GOR officials. Umuco's unsourced and unsubstantiated allegations ran afoul of the High Council of the Press (HCP), which concluded that the paper repeatedly violated Rwanda's media law. This is a view shared by senior GOR officials, who, while accepting Umuco's right to criticize the government and its policies, believe they have the right to take court action if they consider themselves libeled. END SUMMARY.

¶12. (SBU) On Friday, August 4, Emboff received a call from Jean Bosco Gasasiba, a fellow newspaper editor and friend of Bizumuremyi, requesting an urgent appointment. (Note. Gasasiba's paper is a sporadically published Kinyarwanda independent called 'Umuvugizi' or 'Advocate'. End note). During a meeting the following morning, Bizumuremyi and Gasasiba recounted efforts by law enforcement authorities to bring Bizumuremyi in for questioning. Bizumuremyi showed Poloff a summons issued to him by two judicial police officers dated August 3 ordering his appearance at a Kigali court on that same date. Bizumuremyi has been on the run since receiving the summons. Bizumuremyi said he could not find a lawyer to represent him and he was afraid to go to the court alone.

¶13. (U) Bizumuremyi's current troubles appear to have started with the release of Umuco Issue 24 at the end of May. On June 12, the HCP issued a report citing several factual errors and identifying specific points where it felt Rwanda's media law had been violated. This HCP report focuses on an article entitled "Those Who Are Not Corrupt Are Thieves." The HCP shared its findings with eleven individuals accused of wrongdoing in the article, including the President of the Supreme Court, the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Justice, the Minister of Local Government, the Commissioner of the National Police, and the Secretary General of the RPF.

¶14. (SBU) That issue proved mild in comparison with Issue 26, which, among other things, carried a story comparing Kagame's government to that of former President Habyarimana. This article was very similar to one that appeared in Umuco Issue 19, which was confiscated by authorities in September 2005. (Comment There has been no effort this time to confiscate editions of Umoco.) Issue 26 reportedly sold at three times the regular Umuco newsstand price--an indication that

Bonaventure knew that the paper was likely to cause a stir. Issue 26 quickly generated another critical HCP report. HCP Executive Secretary Patrice Maluma told Emboff that the Council asked Bizumuremyi to appear on August 2 to discuss its findings, but that Bizumuremyi failed to show (Note: this contradicts an August 8 statement of Reporters Without Borders that said Bizumuremyi had appeared before the HCP. End note). The HCP report on Issue 26 takes issue with four articles. In addition, one particularly inflammatory issue was a single reference to President Kagame in the Kinyarwanda text as 'ka Kagame.' Roughly translated as 'little Kagame,' this use of the 'ka' is highly derogatory to Rwandans. Bizumuremyi claims the insertion of the extra 'ka' was a mistake resulting from faulty typesetting. Given Bizumuremyi's penchant for pushing peoples' buttons, it seems just as likely that the slight was intentional. (Note. In its August 10 issue, Umuvugizi published an open letter from Bizumuremyi to Kagame in which he apologized for the 'ka', which he termed a mistake, and asked Kagame for protection. End note.)

¶15. (U) The decision to summons Bizumuremyi was taken with the knowledge of at least some senior GOR individuals, who take exception to what they regard as a steady stream of personally libelous statements coming from the paper. Ambassador Richard Sezibera, who has headed up the GOR's human rights dialogue with the Embassy, told Ambassador that under Rwandan law individuals cannot themselves initiate libel cases. Rather, cases must be initiated by the prosecutor's office on behalf of the individual. That being said, most of the individuals accused of misdeeds are GOR or RPF officials who would not request that a case be brought against Bizumuremyi without government sanction.

¶16. (SBU) COMMENT. It is premature to predict how this incident will play out. There has been a generally positive trend in Rwanda regarding respect for freedom of the press. More and more controversial topics have been discussed in both the print and radio media. GOR officials are aware of international criticism of past practices regarding the media and are unlikely to take extreme measures, such as confiscating a newspaper edition, lightly. On the other hand senior officials believe they have the right to seek redress in the courts if they are libeled. Bizumuremyi is a well-known gadfly who has been taken in for questioning in the past without being mistreated and who would have expected that his recent series of articles would have prompted a government response.

¶17. (SBU) Reporters Without Borders (RSF) issued an August 8 statement under the headline 'One newspaper editor goes missing, another targeted by threats and smears.' This statement reflects a general tendency of RSF to publish unsubstantiated and exaggerated statements about press freedom in Rwanda. Among other inaccuracies, Bizumuremyi is not missing but has elected to go into hiding to avoid answering the judicial summons. In a recent conversation with Emboff, Bizumuremyi himself said that while previous RSF statements about him generally accorded with his version of events, the language used by RSF was hyperbole. RSF's director for Africa during an interview on Voice of America yesterday described Umuco as a paper of high quality and Bizumuremyi as a journalist who is serious about his craft. Even fellow independent journalists in Rwanda and other staunch critics of the GOR would not characterize Umuco as a quality paper. It is generally accepted that Umuco peddles in rumors and sensationalized stories that often have no basis in fact. END COMMENT.

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